

# Preservation of Endangered Languages of Bangladesh LAHRA

Authors: Towhid Bin Muzaffar, Haroonuzzaman and Talim Hossain

Reviewed by Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed

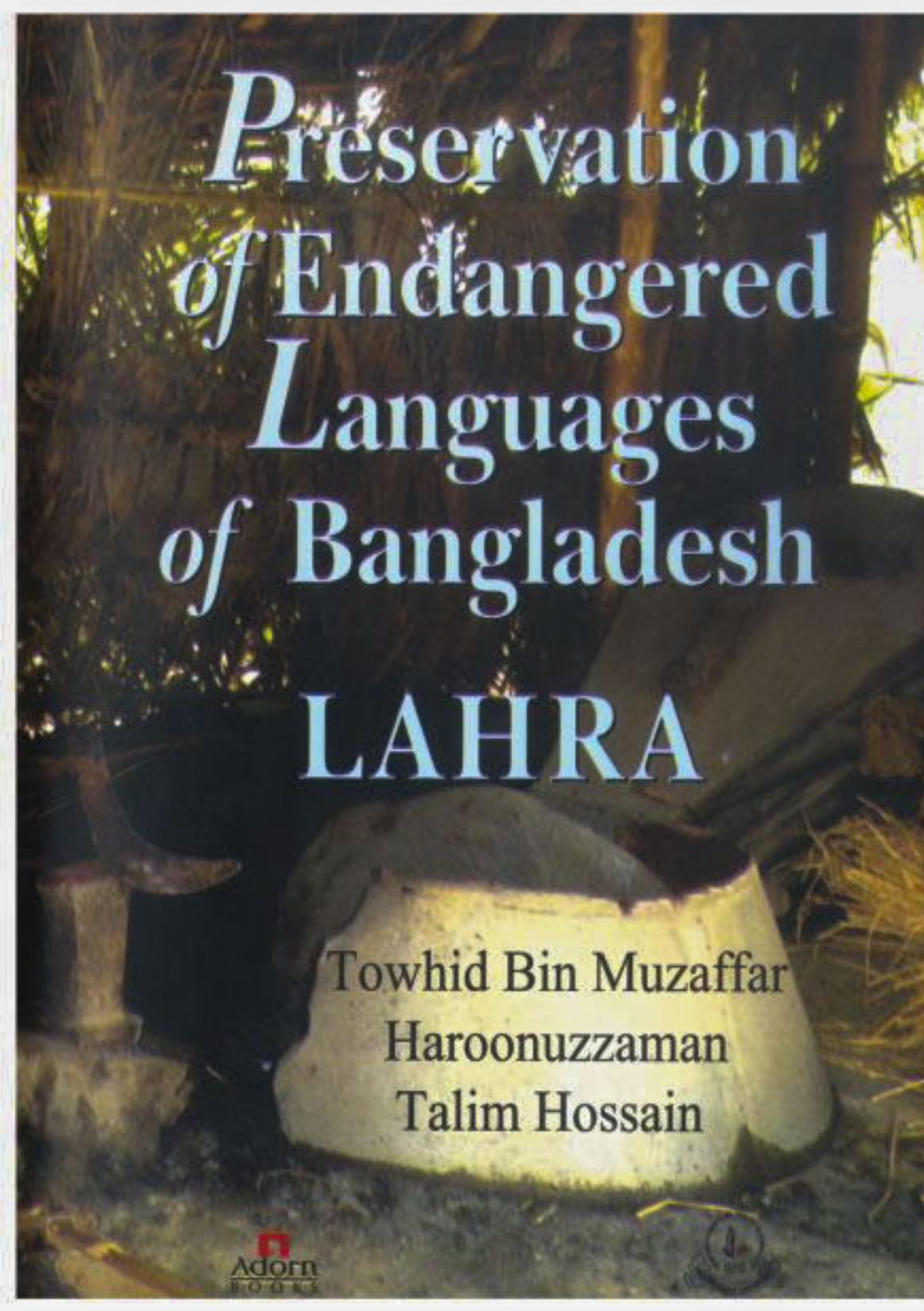
LET me start this book review with three definitions: Ethnography is the study of cultures through close observation, reading and interpretation. Literature has been applied to the imaginative works of poetry and prose. Linguistics is the scientific study of languages, language form, language meaning and language in context.

This book, written by two English scholars and an Anthropologist, has been the outcome of an ethnographic, literary and linguistic research study on a language, almost extinct, and the culture of an Adivasi community based in Ishaqpur in Joypurhat and Pakri in Rajshahi districts. The commendable research study was taken up by the three scholars from Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB) which gives meaningful insights into the language, Lahra, spoken by a very small community of 215 people in that area. The authors worked hard, completed the study and presented us a brilliant opportunity to understand the ethnography and language of that community which were beyond our reach.

Language defines humans. Therefore all the civilizations were built around languages. Language is not only a code or a means of communication, rather it is what defines the entire life of a community. The researchers wanted to learn about the Lahra language, life of the people who speak that language and their contemporary life.

The authors took up this study in 2012 and through many field trips during 2012 and 2013, did a quantitative survey of the said community and then through intensive interviews, focus group discussions, observations and readings found out the community's language, culture and history.

The book is a compilation of three research papers. The first paper attempts at describing the life and living of the community from an ethnographic standpoint. This paper also describes the complete lifestyle of the Lahra people. In the second paper, they present a portion of the lexicon they have compiled from Joypurhat and elucidate the phonology of the language by listing and describing the consonants and vowels of this language. A list of words is also presented which may be used by future lexicographers as a basis for a complete



study and compilation of the Lahra lexicon. The third paper starts the process of preserving the language and the literature of this community. The transcription and the basis for using the word "Lahra" to refer to the language of this community are also discussed.

The research finally discovered that Lahra was a language on the verge of extinction. It also revealed that many Lahra communities of similar sizes (approximately 100 or so) exist in the northern districts of Bangladesh. According to the Ishaqpur Lahra people, riots in the 1960's between Hindus/Adivasis and Muslims led to their exodus from India and they settled down first in Bogra and then migrated to Rajshahi. The Pakri Lahra community obliquely referred to the 1971 Independence War and said all Adivasis had to flee to India when their homes were razed to the ground. After the War they returned to their old hearths and homes.

The detailed baseline survey on the community shows that there are 215 people living in these two villages. The survey also depicts their

gender, education, occupation, type of households, possessions, wage per head and phone expenses. Very few, only 11, have finished class ten and 80 are absolutely illiterate. The community belongs to Sanatan Hindu religion and Kormokar by caste.

The Lahra is an oral language. There are no written scripts. Because of introduction of Bangla in the schools and the community, the speakers are forgetting their original words and expressions in Lahra and thus the language is becoming extinct. The study has a list of each and every member of the Lahra people in these two villages, with their names, education, age, occupation etc.

Interestingly, the researchers have used Arial Unicode MS to transcribe the data. For recording the data they also used the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This was done because, if and when the community decides to write their language and use the Bangla or Roman or any other script, the script could be incorporated to this research work. The research has discussed about the sound system of the Lahra language and also given a list of their sounds and words which are similar to Sanskrit, Hindi and Bangla. For example, Ageh means before, bat is rice, Sandzi means evening or sunset.

Finally the book discusses about the songs, rhymes, oral traditions and stories explaining people's interpretations. The study also describes the hopes and aspirations of the community through recording and analyzing their songs which are at the core of their beliefs and cultures.

This book has been extremely valuable, informative and educative. It gives the reader knowledge and information on the life and culture of a very small community which still speaks their language. It also raises questions that could be researched in the future to find ways to learn more to preserve an almost extinct language and culture.

I congratulate the authors to have taken up this remarkable and fascinating study and bring up to the reader an exceptional portrayal of a community in the northern Bangladesh about which most of us do not know.

Dr. Salehuddin Ahmed is a freelance contributor. He can be reached at sahmed46@gmail.com

# Ekattorer Ekattor Nari

Author: Supa Sadia

Reviewed by Sohel Rana

Y PROFESSION Supa Sadia is Public Relations Officer of Stamford University Bangladesh. But her passion is writing. *Ekattorer Ekattor Nari* (71 women of '71) is indeed a commendable work she has done with great care. The popular mainstream narrative of the 1971 War of Liberation has remained confined for the past 40 years in describing the struggle for, and resulting in, the independence of Bangladesh as a matter of honour of two lakh women.

Unique ways of participation in and passing the war by the nation, but for a rare few, were never in the spotlight as were the account of deaths, physical injuries and armed combat. Women, in particular, remained the victims of war rather than active participants, both in the war fields and other fronts of war.

While the men warriors became heroes after the victory in the war, women on the other side could not get the honour of warriors but carried the wounds of war as they were being treated as victims in the nomenclature of 'birangana'.

*Ekattorer Ekattor Nari* (71 women of '71) by Supa Sadia claims to register a 'protest' in favour of women of 1971 against this conventional narrative of the war. The recently published book chronicles lives of not only the women warriors but women from all walks of life, from every nook and corner of then-East Pakistan, in every role in or out of the war. They are not 71 in number, as the title says, but 72, with a bonus of the then-Indian premier, Indira Gandhi, as she had a significant stake in the war.

The book describes the tales of women participants of war, who were armed warriors, liberation war organisers, had offered nursing assistance, were mothers and wives of martyrs, better halves of leaders and martyred intellectuals. They were also the rape victims, women who assisted the whole process of war or fought in various intellectual fronts. Thus the author tried to sketch a comparatively broad picture of women in the war of independence in 1971.

The names include martyrs like Ayesha Bedouri Chowdhury, Vagirothi, Selina Parveen; acclaimed warriors like Taraman Bibi, Sitara Begum; active participants in armed war fronts like Naila Khan, Nurjanah Murshid, Matia Chowdhury, Hena Das; freedom fighter organisers Nilima Ibrahim, Sufia Kamal, Salina Hossain, and a number of familiar names besides many unfamiliar ones.

Indira Gandhi's inclusion came as a special appendix in the volume.

The two-year work of Supa Sadia hit the bookstands recently, following a similar book on the 1952 language movement styled *Bayannor bayanno nari* (literally, '52 women of '52'), published in 2011.

The reviewer is a major in English Literature and a part-time reviewer.

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## Classics Corner



### Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of His Life and Works

Author: Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff

Reviewed by Mahfuzul Hasib Chowdhury

HANS Christian Andersen, an immortal author hailing from Denmark, was the ugly duckling of his own story—"so gawky and peculiar". In the first part of this compassionate book *Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of His Life and Works*, the author, Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff, traces the story of Andersen's extraordinary life and shows how often his tales grew out of his own experience.

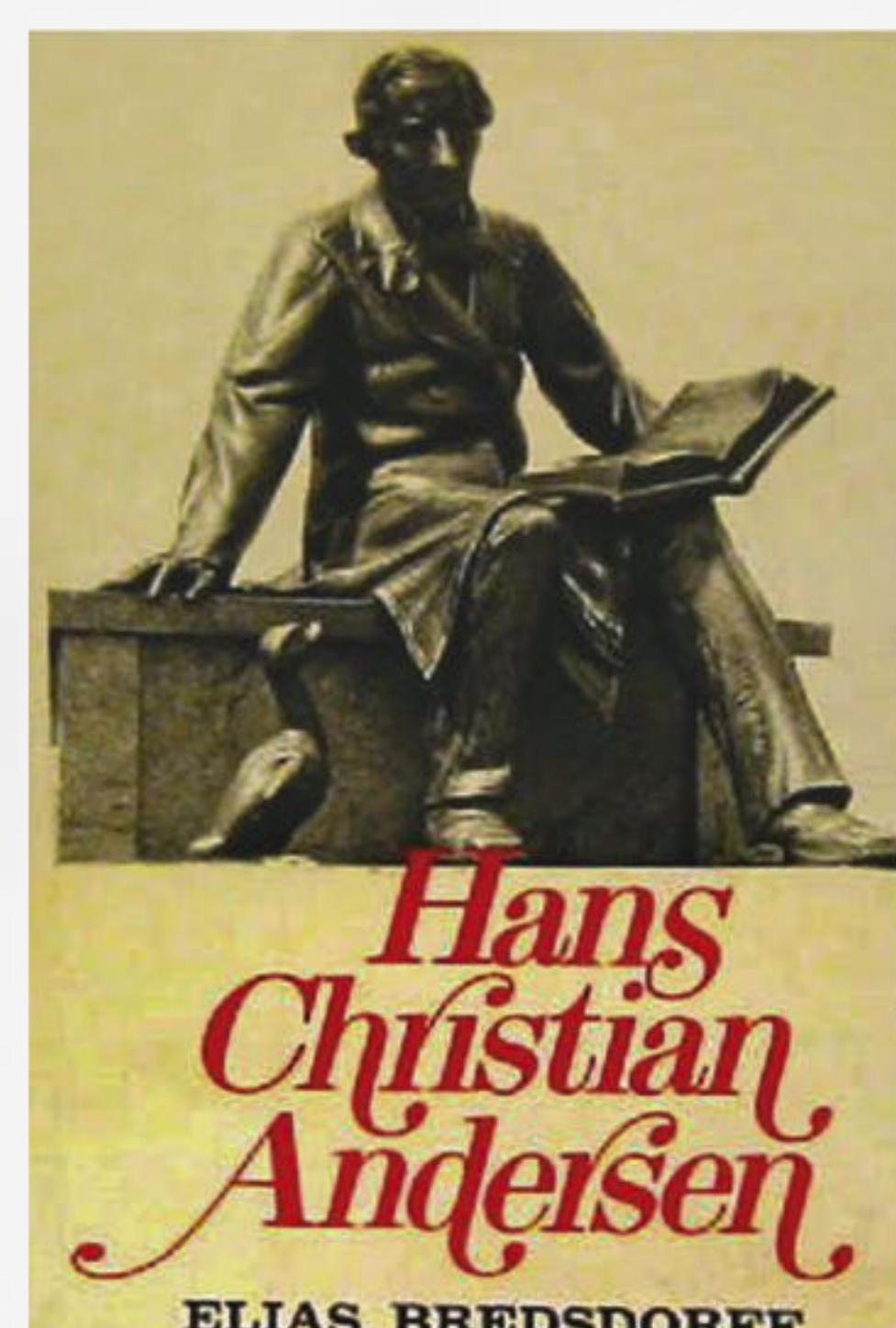
Andersen's career was a weird one. He longed more than anything to be accepted by the ruling classes and found it was only by becoming a famous writer that he could break through social barriers. From the humblest background he rose to win universal fame and to find himself courted by the rulers and aristocrats of several European countries. By the end of his life, though often sad, and even lonely, he had virtually become an institution of Danish literature.

Everywhere he went he sought out the leading writers and artists: Victor Hugo, Henrik Ibsen, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charles Dickens, Jenny Lind, all find a vivid place in his letters, diaries and memoirs. In London he was a literary idol with hostesses vying for his company.

However, not everyone liked him, and to his great distress as any form of criticism could upset him for days, he was often maliciously caricatured as a snob and a fawner. These attacks were really provoked by his oddly childish behavior, his naïve efforts to please people around him. He was not an ordinary man—as was shown by some absurd paper clips which aimed at poking fun at him.

The second part of the book, a study of the tales by Hans Christian Andersen, will be a revelation to most people for, as the author says, Andersen has long been relegated to the nursery and few adults realize the full extent of his wit, charm and fabulous dexterity as a storyteller. According to Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff, the blame lies at the feet of the Victorian lady translators whose versions have unfortunately become sacrosanct. These women bowdlerized, mistranslated and sentimentalized most of the original works of Hans Christian Andersen. In fact they committed every kind of sin against the original appeal of Andersen's stories while

converting his works into English from Danish language. The author, Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff, lets Andersen speak for himself and



shows where his universal artistry as an author lies: the king who turned a somersault for joy saying "You never saw such a beauty" and the tin soldier's parade and the Snow Queen's promise to Kay of "the whole world and a pair of new skates".

This book includes some sketches by Hans Christian Andersen and surprisingly, there is an illustration of some dancing dervishes which reminds of a philosophical trajectory marked by the mystic thoughts of Jalaluddin Rumi, the most famous Persian scholar of all times. Some self-portraits reflect the gladness and melancholy, blitheness and despair that flowed simultaneously through Andersen's lifespan. Portrayal of a funeral procession is also found in the book which hints at Andersen's musings over death during the last few years of his life.

It would be a myopic assessment to comment

that the fables and myths found in stories by Hans Christian Andersen are all for kids. The people he characterized in his books, the birds and animals he personified in his fables have the tested and proven power to mesmerize readers of all ages. Themes of his literary creations exceed all frontiers of time and territories. This is the principal reason behind his eminence as a widely perused writer across the world and his global acceptability which have transformed his books into classics. *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*, *The Wild Swans*, *The Little Mermaid*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *The Princess and the Pea* are some of his most cited stories. He wrote a number of travelogues too like *Shadow Pictures of a Journey to the Harz*, *Swiss Saxony*, *A Visit to Portugal* etc. Soren Kierkegaard, a prominent Danish philosopher wrote a review of 70 pages on his novel *Only a Fiddler*. 2nd April, Andersen's date of birth, is celebrated globally as International Children's Books Day to pay tribute to this illuminated wordsmith. Robert Lytton, a frontline poet and statesman of 19th century England named Andersen "half child, half God" for his plain-hearted but benevolent nature.

Elias Bredsdorff says he first realized Hans Christian Andersen was a man and not just the title of a wonderful book of fairy tales when his grandmother told him that she had once danced with Andersen—then an old man—and that he had trodden on her toes with his ridiculously long feet.

Professor Dr. Elias Bredsdorff taught Scandinavian Studies in Cambridge University, UK for a long time. An eye-catching number of publications on Hans Christian Andersen and Scandinavian literature enlighten his profile. He collaborated with R.P. Keigwin on his translation of the stories by Andersen and has written and edited several books on the medieval and modern literature of Denmark. In 1973 he was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Prize by the Danish Government. This book *Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of His Life and Works*, the fullest biography in any language, is the culmination of a lifelong study of Andersen, the "unsurpassed master" of fairy tales.

The reviewer is Senior Lecturer, Department of English, Metropolitan University, Sylhet.

## POPULAR BOOKS...

### MODI Demystified

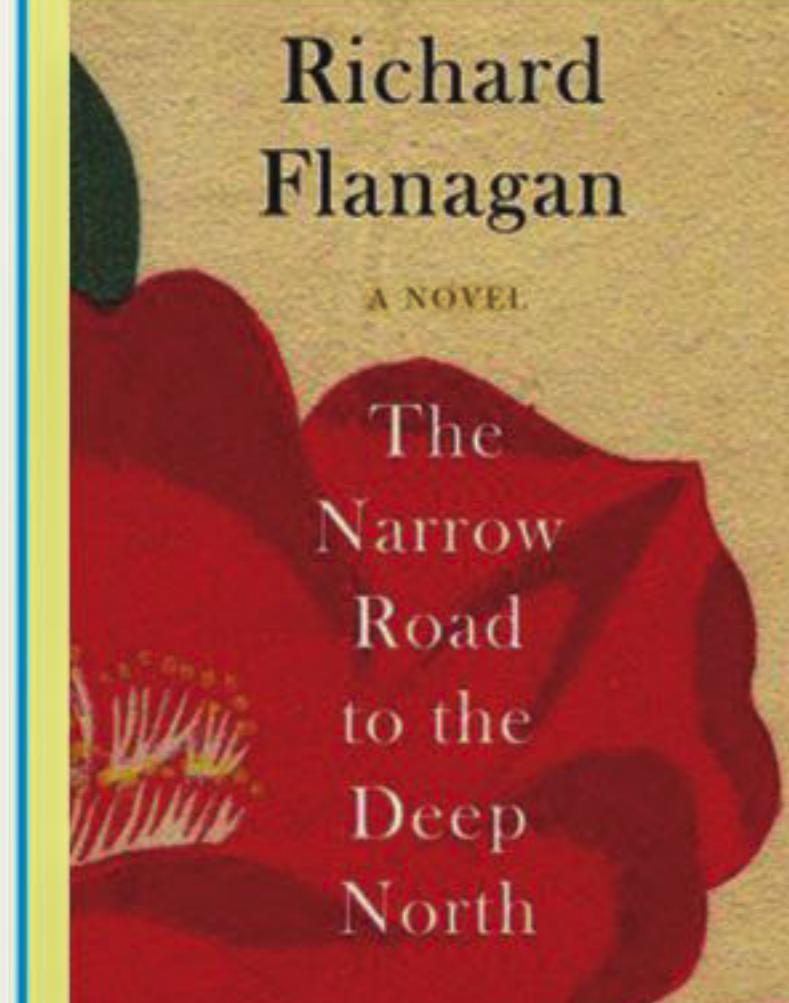
Author: Ramesh Menon

MODI Demystified

N ARENDRA Modi is one of the most controversial politicians dominating contemporary India. Never before have we had a leader like him, one who is loved and hated in equal measure. At a time when endemic corruption and weak governance have become major issues, Modi's image as a decisive leader who can provide a clean administration has catapulted him on to the national stage. Helping his rise are his skills as an orator and claims to development in Gujarat, as also his popularity on social media, knack for attracting the youth and ability to inspire industry's confidence but, for all his achievements he has also spawned a culture of fear that, too, now risks being replicated. Already living in anxiety are such varied groups as minorities haunted by the ghosts of 2002 and his own party colleagues who feel he will crush them as he consolidates power. If he becomes prime minister an ambition that has consumed him for the past many years Modi will have to walk a tight rope, given that India is a complicated country to rule. Will its most incendiary politician manage to lead a billion people? Or will he just get down to implementing what he thinks is the Hindutva agenda? *Modi Demystified* takes a hard, unbiased look at the man through his formative years and his decade in power and attempts to answer these questions.

### The Narrow Road to the Deep North

Author: Richard Flanagan



T HIS book was the Winner of the Man Booker Prize 2014. Forever after, there were for them only two sorts of men: the men who were on the Line, and the rest of humanity, who were not. In the despair of a Japanese POW camp on the Burma Death Railway, surgeon Dorrigo Evans is haunted by his love affair with his uncle's young wife two years earlier. Struggling to save the men under his command from starvation, from cholera, from beatings, he receives a letter that will change his life forever. Hailed as a masterpiece, Richard Flanagan's epic novel tells the unforgettable story of one man's reckoning with the truth.

These books are available at Omni Books, Gulshan, Dhanmondi.